

pealing of overtones over a low 'cello' C. By this point in the album this feels a little rote, a little routine, a little easy. But the brief coda that melts away thereafter gives a passing hint of the elusive, icy translucence that would become Mason's strongest language.

The performances here, by the Octandre Ensemble (of which Mason is a member and a co-founder), are extraordinary, particularly that of pianist Joseph Houston, whose gentle yet full-bodied touch carries the rhetoric of every track on which he appears, and cellist Corentin Chassard, who presents the pair of solos (particularly *Bird Learning to Fly*) with urgency and confidence. They present a small-scale portrait of a music that, at its best, is wonderfully pale and self-effacing, at peace with itself, watching the world alongside us.

Evan Johnson

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James Weeks, Zosha Di Castri, Hannah Kendall, Shawn Jaeger, Jeffery Gavett, Erin Gee, *We Live the Opposite Daring*. Ekmeles. New Focus Recordings, FCR394.

... *we live*/ ... *the opposite*/ ... *daring*/ is Anne Carson's translation of one of Sappho's surviving poetic fragments. Vocal ensemble Ekmeles use these words as the title for their new album, but close up or omit the characteristic disintegration to create something that avoids the neat definition of a sentence or clause: *We Live the Opposite Daring*. A bold artistic choice, perhaps, to offer such a reworking of two so admired poets' work, but the sort of action that is ingrained into the group. In Ancient Greek music theory, 'ekmeles' referred to tones that lie outside accepted tuning systems and were therefore deemed not fit for purpose. These two names find resonance in each other, then, conjuring themes of the re-appropriation of ancient materials in ways that are daring, risky and perhaps even somehow oppositional.

James Weeks' 'Primo Libro' opens the disc and, accordingly, marries ancient and contemporary concerns of choral music. The nearly 18-minute piece presents a series of distinct madrigals forming a whole that moves between solos, duos and quartets, each using a 31-degree scale. The combination of microtonality and parallel intervals offers an aural world that feels both familiar and crisp. The suddenly hushed, gloopy harmony at 5:30 might be heard as some sort of chant, but not *totally*, and importantly this

proximity is handled with the utmost taste: I can hear the reference and how it is *not* that. Also highlighted at this moment, but true throughout, is the artful ordering of the sections. The ensuing solo at 6:30 floats itself free from the previous syrup and leads to the return of harsh, nasal chords. This piece, then, is as masterful a combination of old and new as one might expect from a collaboration of Weeks and Ekmeles.

The namesake of the album follows, Zosha Di Castri's 'We live the opposite daring' (note the different capitalisation from the album title). The work offers four settings of Sappho's poetry. Largely lost, these texts are, to me, beautiful precisely because of their fragmentation. The few words and brackets or spaces alluding to romanticisms never knowable quickly conjure sentimentality, which is perhaps only amplified by absence: a space where not knowing, or not *having* to know, soothes and supports. This reading is not the one that Di Castri adopts, however. Across the first three movements, there is frequent use of both body and mouth percussion. The final of these is the most guilty of this, using rhythmic 'ta'k'd's throughout and ending with an emphatic march-like finish of percussive taps of the leg. Though an attitude of daring might frame the disc, this particular instance is boldly at odds with Sappho's texts, but not in a manner that offers a rewarding dissonance or opposition. The fourth and final section is perhaps closer to what one might expect, offering an astute amalgamation of two resonant and wandering but decidedly different materials. Ekmeles once again demonstrate their talents here, this time through careful attention to timbre and resulting subtle and controlled overtones that drift in and out of audibility as per Sappho's words.

Hannah Kendall's 'this is but an oration of loss' opens with a chorus of harmonicas, flowing undulations of inhales and exhales. Dreamlike and surprisingly expansive for such small and simple instruments, the voices join after three minutes or so, and Kendall's unique soundworld settles. This grace is, to my ears, disrupted by the spoken word, the forthrightness of which is spell breaking. Indeed, the brief monologue at 5:40 starts 'there was a noise, a rattling sound', and I hear this as overly melodramatic word painting such that any sense of previous welcome hypnosis struggles to return. The suggestion of these spoken parts being 'utterances' or 'chants' in the programme note seems to have been omitted.

There is a sort of candour and light-heartedness apparent in much of Shawn Jaeger's 'love is'. The work offers a series of playful near homonyms, rhymes and seemingly absurd statements about

the definition of love. Many of these are couched in lush harmonies that complement this smearing of text. However, when the words become clearer, the piece suffers from similar issues to the piece that precedes it: the boldness of this meditation doesn't come across as believable, I don't think. Indeed, the piece concludes with an assertive 'Love is an action'. I wonder what it might mean for a definition of love to be presented in this performatively courageous, borderline insincere way after such candid playfulness.

Jeffery Gavett's 'Waves' is a wordless triptych, though the three parts aptly flow into each other, feeling more like movements than distinct sections. Diving into the well-established musical trope, Gavett's waves sometimes ebb and flow in large motions through structures and sometimes appear at a much more minute scale through oscillations of pitch. This is, then, a neat distinction and marrying of definitions of waves, perhaps summoning the repetitive movement of an ocean while also drawing attention to literal acoustics. Commendable too are the singers' performances here: juicy and full low drones, and an exceptionally graceful soprano leap at 0:50 of the second movement.

The disc concludes with Erin Gee's 'Mouthpiece 36', split into four sections. The first lasts just two minutes but immediately presents a soundworld that offers an enchanting balance of playfulness and seriousness, a mapping out of a choral language that others might allude to but not capture. This palette is deployed again in the longer second section. There is a sort of *hardness*, both in terms of techniques but also expression, which is artfully nestled in an overall softness, and it is this play that offers the piece its character and form. Part three lasts just 14 seconds and subsequently has the feel of a sort of interlude: a bold compositional choice, but one that Gee pulls off, providing an unexpected reset of attention that I didn't realise I needed. The final movement, which closes the album, draws together the strands of the previous three sections: sustained pitches, sometimes chords, forming the backdrop to various surreal and beguiling mouth noises, with occasionally more discernible melodic lines, all stitched together by playful but decisive structural decisions. A marvel of a piece, to be sure.

There is much boldness to *We Live the Opposite Daring*. Where this courage is indeed daring and oppositional, such as at the start and end of the disc, new choral worlds flourish. I think the take-home message from the disc is underscored in these bookends. Artistic boldness alone is not enough for a successful piece:

meaningful aesthetic bravery requires a balance of what is kept from other practices and ideas that are jettisoned, which foregrounds the importance of ever elusive taste and sensitivity.

Ed Cooper

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Michael Finnissy, *Alternative Readings*. Marsyas Trio, Betts-Dean, Havlat. Métier, MEX 77102.

In my mind, Michael Finnissy occupies an interesting position among composers of his generation. The massive and seemingly impossible piano works, both musically and notationally explosive works of art, invite inclusion with the so-called 'new complexity' school. But for Finnissy and the more interesting composers of that school, I don't think complexity was ever a goal for its own sake: to paraphrase a comment from Brian Ferneyhough, modernism can be seen as late-late-late Romanticism. This connection to Romanticism is brought into especial relief in this intriguing collection of pieces. Ranging over nearly Finnissy's entire career, from 1966 to 2022, these ten pieces are all limited to the instrumental forces of the Marsyas trio: piano, flute, cello, with a guest mezzo soprano. From their great chronological spread and instrumental consistency, the works are unified by a unique sense of lyricism. One wouldn't necessarily associate this composer's work with lyricism in general; it's a function of the curation. These works are predominantly 'little gems', or 'B-sides': two or three short movements exploring a mood or some technical procedure. The connection to Romanticism becomes self-aware as more than one familiar moment from Beethoven or a fleeting stylistic allusion makes its way to the musical surface. His vocal writing is particularly foregrounded in this collection of works, and not only when literally writing for the voice. The treatment of the piano, cello and flute all feature highly vocal moments.

The disc begins and ends with the eponymous work, *Alternative Readings*, from 2002, first as a live recording and last as a studio recording. The texture and discourse are constantly cushioned by a murky haze of low-register chords in the piano. The three instruments occupy different temporal spaces; generally there is a fuzzy quality to this music. Towards the end, Bruckner's first symphony is alluded to like a distant memory. Both the live and studio iterations were recorded with the same performers and, in a demonstration